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ABSTRACT

Non-language elements of bias in mass media--such as images, sounds, tones of voices, inflection, and facial expressions--are invariably integrated with the choice of language. Further, they have an emotional impact that is often greater than that of language. It is essential that the teacher of English deal with this non-language bias since it is his job to help students develop the capacity to analyze, understand, and use the media through which society communicates. It is essential that the teacher allow the student to be placed in the position of making some hypothetical decisions that will result in a biased picture; that he encourage participation in the kinds of activities that will develop a student's ability to use the non-language elements of mass media in communicating a message or describing people and events; that he request the student to compare and analyze his own decisions and those of other students who participated in the above activities; and that he encourage the student to critically analyze cases, patterns, and possible effects of photograph selection by the mass media. In this way the student can be made to realize that equal competition among contrasting viewpoints is society's most effective way of exposing and reducing the dishonest use of bias. (HOD)

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of a speech that will be given informally on Friday, November 23, at the NCTE convention by Robert Cirino, consultant for the Focus Group "How Does Non-Print Bias?"

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CS 500 624

BIAS IN THE MASS MEDIA

A Student-Consumer Approach to Analyzing News Products

I think we will have a good common ground for talking about bias in the mass media if you will--for a moment--become a decision-maker in the mass media. You can do this by making the decisions called for on the dittoed sheets that have been passed out. I'll be glad to answer questions and discuss these situations later, but since we are somewhat short of time, I'd like you to respond as quickly as possible so we can get on to the educational implications of such decisions. You will have three to four minutes to make these seven decisions. You may keep these papers; they are for your own reference.

Regardless of how fair you tried to be, or what your viewpoints are, the decisions you made would produce a biased communication product--one that favors one viewpoint over another. This is no shortcoming on your part, even the best of editors or media executives, using professional journalistic criteria, could not make these decisions without producing a decidedly biased product. This being the case, a consumer will solve little by finding media executives with good motives; he will still be relying on biased information products. Similarly, the buyer of a new car might find automobile executives with good motives, but his car might nevertheless be unsafe. With this in mind, the news consumer might better spend his time examining the final information product rather than the producer's motives, and establish his own approach to judging and coping with biased information products. This does not suggest that we as consumers should ignore the producer's rational, professional standards or intentions. It means we should develop the capacity to analyze mass media products apart from the motives and standards of the producers.

If the consumer judges the product rather than the intentions or performance of the producer, he will find it necessary to expand the meaning of censorship to cover more than the deliberate suppression of information. It must include <u>any</u> decision, practice or assumption that results in the people being deprived of points of view or information. Under this definition, even unquestioned editorial decisions might be seen as censorship. For example, ABC, NBC and CBS refused to show a documentary on population growth and the American future, produced by a Presidential commission. They rejected it for professional reasons, saying it was too biased and took a position on a controversial issue--something documentaries should not do, according to their policies. As a result, millions of people were not able to see this documentary.

Knowing that even a conscientious news agency can't avoid some degree of censorship in the routine editing and selecting

processes that are required daily, the consumer would be wise to concern himself with whether one censorship decision by any single agency of the mass media is offset by the non-censorship of another. If it is offset, the consumer will have a chance of discovering the information from another agency, and the censorship(honest or dishonest) will be exposed and nullified.

The consumer approach also requires expanding the meaning of bias to deal not only with bias that results from deliberate slanting of information to favor a viewpoint or person, but also the bias that can result from professional, economic, technical or time considerations. In short, any information product that is affected by such considerations is biased. Since all information products are effected, all are biased. Thus the consumer does not ask whether or not there is bias, but the more significant questions of what kind of bias exist, who it favors and whether the public is being exposed to countervailing biases that can offset or expose existing bias.

This brings us to a definition of propaganda that evolves from the consumer's approach. Since all information products are biased to some extent and thus favor one perspective as opposed to others, the consumer views all <u>single</u> information products as being propaganda. They may include honest bias or seemingly justifiable censorship, but they are still propaganda. Propaganda by itself is not anything for the consumer to be worried about, but a situation of propagandizing is. This can occur when a person or the public is being exposed to propaganda that comes from a single or limited number of viewpoints, unchallenged by competing propaganda in a comparably potent medium. In short, propagandizing occurs when the consumer is not being exposed to a real competition of viewpoints and information. Propagandizing not only restricts the consumer's choice, it prevents him from being made aware of the dishonest bias and censorship. Uncontested communicators are tempted to resort to blatant lies and deceptions because they are sure such practices won't be exposed. On the other hand, when there is a competition of viewpoints, opposing communicators are quick to point out each other's use of dishonest bias and censorship.

The type of bias created by decisions such as you just made can be differentiated from that produced by the selection of words or style of writing. It is a non-language bias, the type that is created by the visual and audio decision in advertising. Selectivity and association of images, sounds, tone of voice, inflection and facial expressions are elements of advertising, but they are also elements of news products as well. Going over the decision you just made, you can see they involved selection of images and information, the emphasis of one aspect over another and the exclusion of negative or positive information. Take just one choice--your commentator for the nightly news. If you choose just one or two commentators(as the netwoks do), you are unavoidably choosing a man with a certain attitude that is communicated by his style of dress, facial expression, posture and vocal characteristics. Uncontested, he can communicate a strong bias completely outside of or in addition to what he says. Walter Cronkite's gestures and expressions of approval of manned space exploration serve as an obvious example..

These subtle non-language elements of bias are invariably integrated with the choice of language. Further, they have an emotional impact that is often greater than that of language. Since this is the age of television, it is essential that the teacher of English deal with this non-language bias as much as he does with language bias since it is his job to help students develop the capacity to analyze, understand and use the media through which society communicates.

How does the teacher of English help the student deal with the non-language bias in the mass media? First, it is essential that he allows the student to be placed in the position of making the various decisions that create bias--just as you were a few moments ago.

Secondly, the teacher should encourage participation in the kinds of activities that will develop a student's ability to use non-language elements of mass media in communicating a message or or describing people and events. For example, as an exercise

to learn about the bias that can be intentionally or unintentionally produced by the selection of a photograph to go with a news story, the student can select from among four or five photographs the one he thinks best characterizes an event or person that is the topic of the story. (Ideally, it would be a story he's written and photographs he's taken) Next, he can select a single photograph that will visually most discredit the event or person. Next, he can select one that exalts the event or person.

Third, the teacher can request the student to compare and analyze his own decisions and those of other students who did the exercise.

Fourth, he can encourage the student to critically analyze cases, patterns, and possible effects of photograph selection by the mass media.

What can students gain from engaging in the above exercises and analyses?

Behavioral Benefits

The Student should be able to:

1. explain why "objectivity" in producing and presenting information is impossible.
2. list the many decisions that were involved in the production of any mass media product, and describe alternate decisions that could just as well have been made, but weren't.
3. detect and explain the elements of bias as they are evidenced in information products.
4. distinguish , in many cases, between bias that is intentional, deceptive or dishonest compared to bias that is unintentional, unavoidable and honest.
5. communicate his ideas and describe people and events in a wider variety of non-language modes; to produce a more persuasive and, at the same time, more honest information product, and have an awareness of the elements that make it persuasive and honest.

6. explain why exposing the use of intentional or dishonest non-language bias will tend to discredit the practitioner and thus inhibit the use of, or render less effective, such bias.
7. explain how he is or isn't being exposed to—or searching out—biases from all contrasting viewpoints.
8. explain why equal competition among contrasting viewpoints is society's most effective way of exposing and reducing the dishonest use of bias.

A Possible Understanding

The student may realize why it is of benefit to each individual and society at large to have the mass media offer a true marketplace of ideas featuring offsetting biases from all representative viewpoints.

Possible Values

It would be desirable to have the student:

1. respect and support the honest rather than dishonest use of non-language elements of bias.
2. support the right of the people to make up their own minds and oppose those who would restrict an individual's choice or take it upon themselves to present to the consumer "the responsible viewpoints."
3. appreciate and take the risk of competing fairly and honestly with language or non-language bias, even if it means public or classroom rejection of cherished ideas or perceptions.

In ending, let me emphasize that it is especially important for the teacher of English to conduct himself and classroom activities in a way that demonstrates his willingness to reveal his own bias and take the risk of allowing students to communicate and accept whatever ideas they think best, even if the teacher feels they are "irresponsible" or "dangerous."

hand-out A

DECISION-MAKING IN THE MASS MEDIA

Please put yourself in the following executive or editorial position(but maintaining your own values and judgment) and make the required decision as quickly as possible.

1. You are the president of a network television news department. Who will you hire to give commentaries on a regular basis on your evening news program: one or two commentators with established names, or a number of different qualified commentators representing a wide spectrum of political viewpoints? (If there is more than one their turns would be rotated so that there would be only one commentary each evening.)

☐ one or two with established names

☐ numerous, representing a wide spectrum

2. You are the copy editor of a large daily newspaper. On what page will you place the following wire service story:

> A team of psychologists sponsored by the Surgeon General has found that at least under some circumstances, repeated exposure to televised aggression can lead children to accept what they have seen as a partial guide for their own actions. As a result, the present entertainment offerings of the televised medium may be contributing, in some measure, to the aggressive behavior of many normal children.

Page _____

3. You are the general manager of a large wire service. You have just received a story from your Saigon office written by one of your most reliable and respected reporters who was on the scene in Cambodia. Part of his story covering military actions reveals how some American troops were looting stores and houses. You feel that if this information is sent out over the wires it might cause violent or hostile responses from different antiwar groups, and it might displease the Nixon Administration. Will you delete that part of the story telling of the looting, or leave the story intact?

☐ delete

☐ leave intact

4. You are the president of a national television network. The National Organization of Women(NOW) has presented you with the results of their extensive study showing that the commercials

your network is carrying are sexist in nature--demeaning to women and depicting them in a limited number of roles compared to men. They are asking you to run--free--commercials that contest and counter this alleged stereotyped and demeaning depiction of women. They claim it is your ethical duty as well as your legal obligation under the Fairness Doctrine(The Doctrine requires that broadcasters present all sides of controversial issues). Will you grant NOW any free time so they can air their "counter commercials"? If so, in what proportion to the offending commercials?

- ☐ no counter commercials will be allowed
- ☐ yes, in a proportion of ___ counter commercials to every ___ offending commercials

5. You are the president of a national network. Which one of the following events will you afford live coverage to:

a. The fifth manned space trip to the moon
b. A large antiwar demonstration in Washington D.C. with an estimated 500,000 attending.
c. A pro-Administration Vietnam policy demonstration with an estimated 100,000 attending.
d. A U.S. Senate committee hearings on prison conditions and brutality.
e. A White House Conference on Hunger in America
f. The installation of an archbishop

6. You are the president of a national television network. You have just given the President of the United States prime time to address the nation. In his speeech he defends his policies, attacks his critics and defines patriotism and loyalty in a partisan manner. Will you make prime time available to an opposing political party or parties for the purpose of responding to the President's speech?

- ☐ no
- ☐ yes, but only to the major opposition party
- ☐ yes, to all national opposition parties

7. You are the copy editor of a daily newspaper, and have decided to use a photograph to go along with the day's coverage of the watergate hearings. You have decided to use one of the many photographs of chairman Sam Irvin from among many that have been made available to your newspaper. Some show him in an aggressive stance while others show him bored, alert, arrogant, attentive or dozing. Which one will you select? (circle you choice)